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SUBJECT: ARMENIA'S SOVIET-STYLE INDEPENDENCE DAY PARADE A
POPULIST BLAST FROM THE PAST

Sensitive but Unclassified, Please Treat Accordingly.

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Armenia celebrated the fifteenth anniversary of its independence on September 21 with an over-the-top Soviet-style display of military power in a long parade on Yerevan's Republic Square and a host of other events celebrating Armenia's development. Literally thousands of soldiers and columns of vehicles passed by the tribune for review by carefully-selected government officials and a captive diplomatic corps desperate for shade. The impressions made by the display varied widely: While most expats were put off by what they viewed as a push for press coverage by Defense Minister and presidential heir apparent Serzh Sargsian, locals, even those with roots in the opposition, were proud of the display of military achievement and saw nothing inappropriate. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) The last time Armenia celebrated its independence with a military parade was in 1999; the display at that time was considered by locals as a waste of scarce state resources and residents of Yerevan complained bitterly about tracked vehicles tearing up roads paved just for the occasion. This year, Armenia's third worldwide Diaspora conference was timed to coincide with the 15th anniversary of Armenia's independence, and the Defense Ministry decided to pull out all the stops.

¶3. (SBU) By the time Chiefs of Diplomatic Missions dutifully assembled on a tribune just behind the main reviewing stand, the stage of Yerevan's Republic Square was already set: row upon row of Armenian soldiers stood at the ready, with a military band in the center. As it waited for the parade to begin, the Dip Corps entertained itself by reviving the study of Kremlinology, noting who was absent from the tribunal and who arrived last (most important). Absent was Prosecutor General Aghvan Hovsepian and last to arrive before President Kocharian was still the PM -- no surprises.

New From Nissan This Year: the Serzh-Mobile

¶4. (SBU) Precisely at the eleventh stroke of the square's tower clock, the band struck up and two identically-modified Nissan SUVs approached each other from opposite ends of the square. The "Serzh-mobiles," gleaming white with the Great Seal of Armenia emblazoned on the doors, had their back seats and tops removed and each had a brace with a wireless microphone connected to the square's PA system. Minister Sargsian and Chief of the General Staff Harutunian drove around republic square, reviewing and addressing the troops by unit. Each unit -- including representatives of both Armenia's Peacekeeping Brigade and a unit from the "N-K

Defense Forces" -- responded to the Minister's greeting with a fine Soviet "hurrah."

Russian Aircraft and "NKR" Troops Participate in Parade

15. (SBU) When Minister Sargsian finally joined President Kocharian on the stand, Kocharian read a brief address praising the various achievements of independent Armenia and the parade began. Nearly 1,500 soldiers, well equipped and well drilled, marched past the reviewing stand, goose-stepping in perfect time to the band, which baked under a scorching sun. When the last marching unit had left the square, three SU-25 ground-attack aircraft streaming smoke in the colors of the Armenian flag roared overhead in close formation. They were followed by a representative formation of four Russian MiG-29 fighter aircraft and then by several more formations of Armenian military aircraft, for a total of 13 SU-25s and 18 attack and multi-purpose helicopters, thundering at low altitude. When the last aircraft had passed, a stream of military vehicles, from jeeps to APC's to rocket launchers and anti-air missiles passed in review, each maintaining perfect interval. Our Defense Attache counted nearly 130 wheeled vehicles, including four Chinese-made WM-80 rocket launchers. Absent from the parade were the tracked vehicles which would have destroyed the freshly-paved square. The parade ended precisely at noon, when the Diplomatic Corps was bused to Yerevan's grand cathedral to perspire while witnessing the blessing of the Republic by Karekin II, Catholicos of All Armenians.

16. (SBU) Reactions to the parade varied very widely. Every non-Diaspora expat with whom we spoke was aghast at the display. The French Ambassador -- the longest-serving diplomat in Armenia -- agreed that the event seemed like a

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coronation of Sargsian and made Armenia look more like a banana republic than a prospective partner of the EU. Defense Attaches agreed that if the goal was to demonstrate that Armenia had a well equipped and well organized force, the parade was a success. Most puzzling for us, however, were the universally positive reactions of all of our local contacts. Even those associated with the opposition were both moved and proud to see the show of force; none thought it inappropriate, although they complained about the exclusion from the reviewing stand of leaders of Armenia's struggle for independence who now supported the opposition.

17. (SBU) Comment: Including in Armenia's parade both representatives from the Defense Forces of the "NKR" and a squadron of Russian fighter aircraft seemed to us a deliberate signal of how integrated these forces are with Armenia's own defense forces. Defense Minister Sargsian's savvy use of this holiday will surely boost his personal popularity rating as the election season continues.
GODFREY